**Black Power, Black Theatre and Black Humour.**

More than forty years ago I was quoted as saying ‘the most important attribute one needed as an Aboriginal political activist was a healthy sense of the absurd’. This was a quality I deemed necessary if one was to effectively analyse and cope with the gobbledygook nonsense spoken by politicians of all political persuasions. It seemed to me in 1971, at the age of twenty one, that the antics of then Prime Minister Billy McMahon were as if they were straight out of the script of a Monty Python sketch. The McMahon government’s Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, W.C. Wentworth, was a comic cartoon character and was the laughing stock of Federal Parliament, regarded by most political commentator’s as eccentric at best or a raving lunatic at worst.

Furthermore, a healthy sense of the absurd also helped one try to unravel and interpret the nonsensical versions of Australian history that were being taught to unsuspecting schoolchildren and university students in the early 1970s. Back in those days, Australian history textbooks were still devoid of an Aboriginal perspective and voice. In fact Aboriginal peoples were almost completely absent from Australian history, except for an occasional reference to boomerangs and didgeridoos. Not to mention the inevitable assertions that they were ‘the most primitive race’ and because of their inferior racial qualities they had not been able to survive contact with the inherently superior British civilization.

These falsifications of history sustained and fed the popular and bipartisan support for the racist policy of assimilation which sought to ‘absorb’ the remaining Aboriginal survivors into a homogenous White Australia, thus through the process of assimilation Aboriginal people would cease to exist and there would be no ‘Aboriginal problem’. These irrational and twisted notions were wonderful material that could be easily challenged with a subversive sense of humour.

As a result some of us in the Black Power movement thought that humour was an important and powerful piece of weaponry for us to deploy in our struggle against State oppression. Further, we came to believe that the most appropriate form of humour to use would be that of satire and ridicule, especially given that Australian society, its political institutions and mythology were to us laughable. We felt that our approach would be entirely consistent with our Aboriginal cultural values because, as we all know, we have always deployed humour both as a defensive and offensive weapon in our long struggle for justice. If you listen to Aboriginal peoples from Canada, USA or Aotearoa (New Zealand), then you will find their sense of humour is remarkably similar to ours.

One of the most effective uses of humour during the Black Power era was the success of the Redfern National Black Theatre (NBT) production of ‘Basically Black’ at the old Nimrod Theatre in 1972. The NBT had been established in Redfern by Bob Maza, who had recently returned from New York where he had visited the national Black Theatre of Harlem. The show ‘Basically Black’ had evolved from an earlier show Bob had performed in Melbourne with Jack Charles and the Nindethana Theatre, and was an intensely political review. But the political material was delivered through masterful satirical comment about Australian society and its racial obsessions and attitudes toward Aboriginal people. One sketch that featured me, Bindi Williams and Zac Martin lampooned Australian popular mythology that the only thing Aborigines were good at was boxing. ‘Basically Black’ won over its predominately white audiences at the Nimrod through its ability to make them laugh at themselves.

This was a clever use of satire and ridicule to get an otherwise unresponsive white audience to gain some small insight into what it might be like to be black in a white-supremist society as Australia was then. But the best part for us blackfellas from NBT was that the humour itself was subversively political in terms of presenting a direct challenge to prevailing racial attitudes, and we were not only able to get away with saying things to whitefellas that might have got us shot in other places at the time, but we also managed to get people to seriously think about the issues.

Another example of the use of this type of humour that subverts the sense of racial superiority of white Australians is seen in the film ‘Backroads’ that I made with Phil Noyce in the early 1970s. There is a scene in the film, shot in Brewarrina, where two local blackfellas, Richard “Tricky Dick” Sullivan and “Doc” Coffee are sitting by the road playing cards. A white man (Bill Hunter) drives up in a flash car and leans out the window and says, ‘Hey Jackie, can I take this road to the pub?’ Sullivan looks up and says, ‘You might as well you white bastard. You took everything else!’ In that one line “Tricky Dick” Sullivan pinpricks the white man’s sense of privilege and sovereignty and reminds us all that issues from the original invasion live on and reside in the hearts and minds of Black Australia.

For me one of the more memorable occasions in which I was able to use humour to defuse an otherwise ugly situation occurred in 1972 at the Aboriginal Embassy. On that day there were about a dozen of us scruffy activists at the Embassy sitting around yarning and reading, when one of us noticed a delicious smell wafting across the lawn. Upon investigation we discovered that on another part of the Parliamentary lawns the Australia Meat Producers Association had set up a flash BBQ area and were hosting a function for Members of Parliament from across the road. The food was first class and they even had a large marquee dispensing top shelf wines. All was going along fabulously until the parliamentarians and the big wigs from the Meat Producers Association realised that there were a bunch of scruffy and hungry black intruders in their midst. This led to much muttering and consternation among the assembled dignitaries, before a nervously smiling gentleman from the Meat Producers came over to us blacks as timidly asked what we wanted.

We pointed out that we thought it might be nice if they would allow us to partake of some of their obviously good products and that we would then be in a position to recommend their beef to the hundreds of tourists who visited the Aboriginal Embassy every day, and that way everybody would end up happy. The man said, ‘I will be back in a moment’, and he scarpered away to consult with a couple of large, meat-producer types, before walking back over to advise us (to our surprise) that we were welcome to join in and partake of a meal and some wine. This was a splendid suggestion from our point of view and so we swept into their encampment and began to help ourselves to their generous offer. However, there were still many of their VIPs who were casting nervous glances and an air of tension could be felt. I thought it best to dispel the tension and ease the nerves by making them feel more relaxed. So I asked someone if I might say something on their grand PA system and what else could they say but yes. So I commandeered the microphone and got everyone’s attention.

I began in my usual way ‘Unaccustomed as I am at public speaking...I would just like to say that we from the Aboriginal Embassy would like to thank the Australian Meat Producers Association for their kind generosity in organising this here BBQ for us today. And therefore, never let it be said that a Black man can’t get a steak in his own land!’

Everyone laughed and the mood instantly relaxed, and all went about the business of having a good function. Their BBQ was a public relations success because my speech was reported in the papers the next day and we from the Embassy had a great feed, drank some top quality wine, and won over a few new friends from a part of Australian society we would never have expected to.

So humour can be used in very subversive ways to get our point across. If it is used creatively it can sometimes disarm even the most hard-core racist attitudes because you can get the racist to laugh before they think. If they laugh before they think, then they will invariably and unwittingly gain some small insight that they did not have before. It may only be a chink in the wall, but it is a beginning.

**Gary Foley**

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